

# A Brief History of Holy Blossom Temple's First 150 Years



As the chronicler of Canadian Jewry, Ben Kayfetz, observed, the year 1856 was a determining year in Jewish history. It marked the birth of several imposing figures who would profoundly influence Jewish life over the next century: Sigmund Freud, Ahad HaAm, A.D. Gordon, Louis Brandeis, and most symbolically, N.H. Imber, the author of the words to HaTikvah, the Jewish national anthem.

1856 also was the year Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto's first and arguably Canada's most historically important synagogue, was founded.

Toronto was then a sleepy town of some 40,000 inhabitants, including about 60 Jews, most of British or German origin. As was often the case in many early Jewish communities, the purchase of land for a cemetery preceded the founding of a synagogue. Prayer services, kosher food, and ritual baths were important, but nothing was more necessary than a sacred burial ground. Death was an early and frequent visitor to most 19th century families, and so, in 1849, two of the first Jewish settlers in Toronto, Judah Joseph and Abraham Nordheimer, purchased land on the eastern outskirts of the city (at Pape and Danforth Avenues). Just in time, as it turned out, as Joseph was among the first to be buried there.

Most of Toronto's Jews were merchants, and Saturday was their busiest day; few had any time or interest in Sabbath services. But in 1856, the railway reached Toronto with its promise of bringing more settlers, including Jews, to the city. Toronto's male Jewish population grew to about 70. One of these men took it upon himself to build a synagogue.

Lewis Samuel, an orthodox British Jew, organized a meeting of seventeen men at the home of a recent arrival from Montreal, Albert Asher. Within a few weeks, under Samuel's dynamic leadership, the group raised enough money to rent the upper floor of Coombe's Drug Store at the corner of Yonge Street and Richmond Street for High Holy Day services. With a Sefer Torah borrowed from Canada's only other synagogue, the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of Montreal, Toronto's first Jewish prayer services were held on Rosh HaShanah, September 29, 1856. Astonishingly, over one hundred people showed up, some coming from surrounding towns and villages.

The arrival of a permanent Torah a year later was a profoundly significant event. Not only did it allow Sabbath and holiday services to proceed, but it also provided the congregation with its unusual name. "The Toronto Hebrew Congregation," as it was



originally called, simply did not satisfy the aesthetic need of some members for a more evocative name. When the Torah arrived from Montreal, a gift from Albert Asher's parents, it came with a silver pointer inscribed in Hebrew to "The Holy Congregation, Blossoms of Holiness [*Pirchei Kodesh*], in the city of Toronto." No one knows for certain why the Asher family referred to the congregation in this way. Perhaps they were using a Talmudic term for the young priests of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, "blossoms of priesthood" or "holy blossoms;" or perhaps they liked the vision of holy buds that would eventually blossom into a mighty Jewish community on the largely empty vast tracts of land in Upper Canada. Whatever the case, the name resonated amongst the congregants, and on July 23, 1871, the synagogue officially adopted the name פֶּרְחֵי קֹדֶשׁ—Toronto Holy Blossoms Congregation.

As predicted, the railway did bring in thousands of new settlers, and by the 1870s almost 400 Jews lived in Toronto and its surrounding towns and villages. Some joined the new synagogue, making the floor space above Coombe's Drug Store inadequate.

When attempts to buy a vacated church failed, the indomitable Lewis Samuel, the president of the synagogue and the recognized leader of Toronto Jewry at the time, mobilized the community to build their own sanctuary. He took charge of the campaign to raise funds to erect a building near the corner of Richmond and Victoria Streets in the heart of the city. Fearing the growing popularity of Reform Judaism in the United States, Samuel made one demand: that the synagogue maintain its Orthodox ritual. The building was designed with a separate balcony for women and with a mikveh (ritual bath) in the basement.

The opening of the new sanctuary on January 20, 1876, was a spectacular event for Toronto's nascent Jewish community and a sign of its coming of age. All of the city's newspapers gave it front page coverage, describing in colourful detail the parade of city elders, clergy, politicians, and the entire congregation marching behind the Sefer Torah from Coombe's Drug Store to the new synagogue. Since Samuel had collected approximately twenty-five per cent of the total funds from non-Jews, Toronto's Christian leadership was in the forefront of the procession. The building itself was described in the press as an "architectural gem" with a seating capacity of 400 and classrooms in the basement—a novel addition for a synagogue at the time. The public celebration was an early indication of how important Holy Blossom had already become and how highly respected Toronto's tiny Jewish population was.

The new sanctuary may have been a source of pride, but the quality of leadership within it was decidedly not. Over the next two decades Jewish newspapers throughout

the world regularly carried advertisements from Holy Blossom seeking qualified rabbis, cantors, teachers, shochets (ritual slaughterers), and mohels (those trained to perform ritual circumcision)—preferably all the same person—with little success. A professional cantor who was also a shochet did respond in 1886, but he could neither chant nor slaughter chickens and was soon fired. An acceptable teacher was hired, but he proved to be a disaster in performing circumcisions and he, too, was let go. Without spiritual guidance, religious life declined. Few attended services, so fines were imposed on members who did not show up. A visitor from outside of Toronto described services at the synagogue as “noisy and chaotic.” Finally, in desperation, congregational leaders decided to edge the synagogue closer to the more popular—and certainly better behaved—Reform synagogues in the United States.

It would require firm leadership to guide Holy Blossom along its new route. And fortunately, in the person of Edmund Scheuer, that leader arrived. He was a man of prodigious energy and extraordinary longevity. An Alsatian by birth and a Reformer by conviction, Scheuer arrived at Holy Blossom in 1886 from the first Canadian Reform congregation, Anshei Sholom, in Hamilton, Ontario, where he had introduced English prayers, mixed seating, and musical instruments—all anathema to the largely Orthodox membership of his new synagogue. Scheuer believed Holy Blossom Temple would succeed only if it became more modern and more relevant to Toronto Jewry. When he initially failed in the attempt, he and some of his supporters left just before the High Holy Day services in 1887 to conduct their own Reform services in a hired hall. Several years later, though, he returned as the Director of Education to lead the winning fight to make Holy Blossom a Reform synagogue. He was accurately described by friend and foe alike as “the father of Canadian Reform Judaism.”

Fortunately for Scheuer—and for the congregation—he found new allies by the 1890s. The venerated Lewis Samuel, determinedly Orthodox, had died a few years before, and his business partner and successor as president, Alfred Benjamin, was far more accommodating to the demands for change. And finally, the synagogue had found a legitimate rabbi who was prepared to come to Toronto. Perhaps because he was so young—only 22 years old when he was hired—Barnett Abraham Elzas rashly agreed to leave London, England, where he had been ordained at Jews College, to live in the far less cosmopolitan city of Toronto.

Predictably, he did not stay long. He arrived just in time to deal with the great organ caper. With his permission, the Reformers of the congregation installed an organ in the sanctuary—to increase attendance at services and to attract new members.

While some congregants immediately resigned, others were even more direct: they carried out the offending instrument and left it in the yard. Benjamin ordered the organ reinstalled and, when unable to find a Jew who knew how to play it, hired a young Christian woman. That was too much for some members who resigned to join the newly founded Goel Tzedec synagogue on University Avenue.

After three unhappy years, Rabbi Elzas left for California. His replacement, 24-year-old Abraham Lazarus, also a Londoner and graduate of Jews College, arrived at a time when the battle between the “modernizers” and the “traditionalists” was peaking. He tried to bridge the chasm by pleasing both groups; services would still be in Hebrew—but parts would be in English; there would be some music—but not too much; and he conducted Sabbath services without a hat—once. He introduced Canada’s first Thanksgiving holiday into the liturgy, but the friction continued, and a dejected Rabbi Lazarus left for the warmer climes of Houston, Texas.

Meanwhile, by the 1890s, the face of Toronto Jewry was rapidly changing. The murderous pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe following the assassination of the Czar in 1881 had propelled hundreds of thousands of Jews to seek safety elsewhere. Toronto’s Jewish population tripled in a few short years. Indeed, by the first decade of the new century, there were some 30,000 Jews living in the city. The already established Jewish community—Anglophile, integrated, and well-off—was rapidly outnumbered by the penurious, Yiddish-speaking, Orthodox Jews of Russia and Poland.

Alfred Benjamin was not disturbed by what some of his members called an “invasion.” “Every effort must be made to Anglicize them,” he suggested. And the best way to accomplish that, he believed, was to build a larger synagogue to accommodate the newcomers. The Richmond Street synagogue would be far too small for Benjamin’s expansive dreams, and its classrooms too shabby and overcrowded for the innovative religious school envisioned by Scheuer. And so Benjamin and his brother Frank committed the enormous sum of \$10,000 to build a more modern sanctuary. And once again, congregants and the city’s business community responded generously.

In 1897 the impressive new synagogue on Bond Street, just east of Yonge Street, was opened. Once again the dedication ceremonies were attended by the elite of Toronto, and once again newspapers fawned over the imposing architecture and design. It was, everyone agreed, quite an achievement for a synagogue with a membership hovering around 125.

While some newcomers joined Holy Blossom, most of the Jewish refugees rejected any attempt to be “Anglicized.” But they did benefit from the financial help of Holy

Blossom members who contributed large sums of money to sustain the growing community.

The appointment of Solomon Jacobs as the new rabbi was a turning point for the synagogue. A passionate Anglophile and graduate of Jews College, the 40-year-old Jacobs had already led congregations in England and Jamaica when he arrived at Holy Blossom in 1900. He was a traditionalist yet sympathetic to the desires to reform. He made changes as slowly and as deliberately as he could. He continued the innovations of his predecessors: families could sit together at some services; the organ could accompany the cantor except on Yom Kippur; and more English could be used. But he was not yet ready—and neither was the congregation—to officially affiliate with the Reform movement although Leo Frankel, the synagogue president from 1910 to 1930, was anxious to get it done quickly.

In his twenty years as rabbi, Solomon Jacobs set the pattern that would be followed by his successors. He became the representative voice for the Jewish community and its spokesman on most issues. He acidly reprimanded the Presbyterian Church for its widespread missionary activity amongst the Jewish newcomers. He was approached for advice by all levels of government on matters regarding Jewish life in Canada. At a time when nativism and xenophobia were growing in Canada, he publicly spoke out on the need for immigration reform. As well, he regularly went to court on behalf of indigent Jews who felt unfairly treated by the law. Churches invited him to speak from their pulpits. Indeed, his sermons were so widely admired that Christian divinity students were made to study them. He was on the board of many civic charities and relief organizations and introduced social justice issues to the congregation.

1920 was a watershed year for Holy Blossom. With the sudden passing of Rabbi Jacobs, the reformers who now controlled the Board decided that Jews College in London did not reflect the true North American religious spirit they were hungering for, and so they hired their first American rabbi, Barnett Brickner. He was a graduate of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, the training ground of the Reform movement.

Brickner moved swiftly to adopt the Reform prayerbook, and most Reform ritual. And in 1921 Holy Blossom voted to become an affiliate of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Holy Blossom now felt fully released to pursue its Reform orientation and to become less European and more North American in its outlook.

Soon after his arrival in 1925, Rabbi Ferdinand Isserman introduced a Sunday morning service to enable the businessmen of the congregation to worship weekly even if they could not attend on Shabbat. Surprisingly, these services attracted many

non-Jews as well. In 1928 Reverend E. Crossley Hunter, a friend of Rabbi Isserman, suggested they organize the first Jewish-Christian pulpit exchange in the British Empire. When Isserman spoke at the Carlton Street United Church one Sunday evening, the police estimated that they had to turn away five thousand people. Isserman's ecumenism was matched by his concern for the growing number of unaffiliated Jews in the city.

The final steps toward total reformation took place under the leadership of a 29-year-old Hebrew Union College graduate, Maurice Eisendrath, who took the pulpit in 1929. A firebrand orator and, at the time, a passionate critic of Zionism, Eisendrath disliked traditional Orthodox ritual and saw it as a hindrance to Jewish progress in the modern world: his centrepiece sermons—often printed in full in the local newspaper—attracted Jew and non-Jew alike to the pews; and the hot issue of wearing a skullcap during services was resolved when Eisendrath suddenly began conducting services bare-headed—to the shock of many traditionalists. But within a short period of time, most members followed his lead.

By the Depression years of the 1930s, Holy Blossom Temple was becoming well known for its outreach programs for the underprivileged and under-represented segments of Canadian society, Jew and non-Jew alike. Social justice concerns were increasingly a priority. Eisendrath even had a regular radio show in which he spoke out boldly on the social and political issues of the day, including his concern for the Arab population in Palestine. With its turn to Reform, Holy Blossom now emphasized a Judaism that it believed was not only right for the times and responsive to the new challenges confronting Canadians, but one that was also universal, liberal, humanitarian, and based on the prophetic vision of one humanity. It was a view of Judaism that would guide Holy Blossom's attitude toward social issues to the present time. There was scarcely a social movement or a humanitarian crisis to which the synagogue did not respond and in which its rabbis did not play a significant role. This alone made Holy Blossom unique among Canada's synagogues.

It was also a congregation of some courage and much prescience. How else can its decision to move to a new building be explained? Even though Toronto had a population of some 50,000 Jews in the 1930s, not many lived near the Bond Street synagogue. Eisendrath persuaded a cautious board that a new building was necessary. While the bulk of the Jewish community still lived below Bloor Street, the surprising location of the new Holy Blossom would be miles away, on Bathurst Street near Eglinton Avenue, an area still with unpaved roads and fields.

In fact, it was an inspired choice, perhaps the most important decision made in

the Toronto Jewish community in those years. The choice of north Bathurst enticed the community to follow, and within one generation the vast majority of Toronto's Jews lived closer to Holy Blossom than they did to the areas south of Bloor Street. Whether those who chose the new location had predicted it or not, they had selected a site that would shortly be in the centre of Toronto's largest Jewish neighbourhoods.

It was a spectacularly audacious decision. Who would think it possible to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars to put up a magnificent structure, designed by world class architects, in the middle of the worst depression in Canadian history and in a place where there might never be enough Jews to fill it? The new sanctuary would seat 1,200, while the membership consisted of only 250 families. And even more bold—at the time when the Zionist cause was at the centre of Jewish life—the synagogue broke with the ancient tradition of facing east toward Jerusalem during prayers. Instead, the sanctuary was designed so that its doors would open onto Bathurst Street and its grand façade and tower could be seen for miles. Although the architecture was modelled after New York's Temple Emanu-El, Holy Blossom Temple was derided by its critics as “the Church on the Hill.” Yet, now it is clear that the edifice has stood the test of time, and is still considered to be an architectural masterpiece.

Such boldness and optimism would be the hallmark of Holy Blossom for the remainder of the century and beyond. The Temple's objective was to continue to adapt Judaism for the modern world; its instrument—the new generations of rabbis who followed Eisendrath: Abraham Feinberg, W. Gunther Plaut, Harvey Fields, Dow Marmur, and John Moscovitz. All of them were determined to make the Temple a centre for ideas and leadership for the worthy causes of Jews and non-Jews alike. Each of them in his own way was influenced by the times and responded to the needs of the era—sometimes turning outward to address the social and political issues of the greater community, sometimes inward to address the political and religious issues of the Jewish People in particular.

While some observant Jews chided Holy Blossom for its indifference to God—one president in the 1920s admitted he was an atheist—the new rabbinical leadership slowly welcomed God back into the services.

Abraham Feinberg arrived at the worst of times. It was 1943; Canada was in the middle of a bloody war. Close to 200 members had enlisted in the armed forces and the brand new auditorium was full of sewing machines and cutting tables as volunteers from the Temple's Sisterhood made clothes and blankets for the troops. Undeterred, Feinberg, later Canada's leading pacifist, threw himself into the war effort, speaking at

rallies in support of the Allies. Within a few months, he had become the spokesman for Ontario Jewry in its vain attempt to remove religious education from the public schools.

Feinberg was an unusual choice for Holy Blossom: only a few years before he had been “Anthony Frome, the Poet Prince of the Air Waves,” a popular crooner in New York with his own daily radio show. But he proved to be just what the synagogue needed. While he was a radical in politics—for a time he was known as the “Red Rabbi”—he was conservative in ritual. He introduced more Hebrew into services and spoke from the pulpit about the Zionist cause. Under his guidance, the Temple became a strong advocate of Jewish statehood. Along with the incomparable Max Enkin, then president of the synagogue, he tripled the Temple membership, strengthened ties with the Christian community, and lobbied for more liberal immigration policies—especially for Jews.

He was succeeded by the polymath W. Gunther Plaut. Born and educated as a lawyer in Berlin, Plaut was plucked out of Nazi Germany by Hebrew Union College to study for the rabbinate. After serving congregations in Chicago and St. Paul, he marvelled at Holy Blossom, “where the demand was always for more Jewishness and where attachment to Israel was one of the most important factors.” It was a perfect match. In the course of his career Plaut wrote some 25 books, including his monumental *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*. His leadership was acknowledged in the Jewish community when he was elected president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and of the Canadian Jewish Congress, and on a national level when he was appointed to various government commissions in the areas of human rights and immigration. Plaut’s prestige and charisma allowed the Temple to become Canada’s premier Jewish centre of religious and secular intellectualism, of ecumenism and reason.

In this he was helped by two fellow German Holocaust survivors, Emil Fackenheim, a renowned philosopher and Jewish theorist who regularly lectured at the Temple, and Heinz Warschauer, who was its imperious Director of Education for over 30 years. Along with Plaut, these two scholars gave the Temple an intellectual heft on Jewish matters unmatched by any other synagogue and arguably by any university at the time.

Rabbi Plaut was deeply disturbed by the weakness of the Reform movement in Canada. In a few short years new Reform congregations were sprouting in Ottawa, Winnipeg, Vancouver, Montreal, and in other parts of Toronto, largely thanks to Plaut’s efforts and the Holy Blossom treasury.

Women who had played an important role in the spiritual life of the synagogue and whose sisterhood was for many years a key element in the synagogue’s programs

for the poor, the elderly, and the less fortunate, were finally given the recognition owed them: in 1974 Henrietta Chesnie was chosen the first woman president of any synagogue in Canada, and in 1980, at the urging of Rabbi Harvey Fields, the Temple appointed Canada's first female rabbi, Joan Friedman.

Rabbi Harvey Fields was most interested in liturgy. He replaced *The Union Prayerbook* with the fuller *Gates of Prayer*, which he assisted in writing and editing. He also prepared a series of user-friendly prayer pamphlets for each holiday to strengthen home observance. He emphasized an early Friday night service to encourage families to spend time together around their own Shabbat tables and established the Department for Jewish Living to animate the congregation with new energy and new young leadership.

In 1983 a different kind of rabbi arrived. A child-survivor of the Shoah and a longtime rabbi of a London synagogue, Dow Marmur was both traditionalist and pragmatist, teacher and preacher par excellence. His major concern was adult education—when teaching his congregants the value of Reform Judaism, his emphasis would be on the noun, Judaism, not the adjective, Reform. Under his tutelage, adult learning became a priority. Though he found his early years at the Temple “challenging,” Marmur was widely respected for his erudition, appreciated for his willingness to discuss personal theology, and admired for his successful efforts in making services more traditional and meaningful.

Music played a major role in enhancing the services. Ever since the organ frolic of the 1890s, the Temple has been in the forefront of Canadian synagogues in its use of music to add to the spirituality of the liturgy. It has been fortunate to have had a series of able musical directors and cantors, none more talented than Benjamin Maissner, described by Marmur as a “gifted and knowledgeable” cantor. Over his many decades, he taught the congregation to sing again.

Marmur was justifiably proud that the various programs at the synagogue provided a platform for what he described as “left of centre” opinions regarding Israel, Jewish life, and Canadian society and politics. The synagogue was singular in its involvement in social issues. Its unique Department for Jewish Living sponsored a “third seder” to draw attention to the sorrowful plight of refugees. As well, Holy Blossom was the first synagogue to participate in the “Out of the Cold” program to provide hot meals and shelter to Toronto's burgeoning homeless population, the first to build an apartment complex to provide affordable housing to the working poor, and the first to establish an AIDS committee to provide emotional and financial support for those suffering

with HIV-AIDS. For Rabbi Marmur, social action was not an alternative to prayer, but an expression of it. It was part of the obligation of being a Jew.

There was scarcely a cause in which Holy Blossom has not played a leading role since the 1940s. Social Action was in many ways the synagogue's nerve centre. The synagogue was integrally involved in the American civil rights movement, in the Soviet Jewry campaign, in the battle against apartheid, and, here at home, in the struggle for the rights of women, gays, native peoples, new immigrants, and the homeless.

In 2000, Rabbi John Moscovitz succeeded Rabbi Marmur. Rabbi Moscovitz challenged Holy Blossom Temple to renew itself by creating a pre-eminent campus of liberal Judaism with an intensity in learning and worship not seen in most Reform congregations. Through the generosity of Gerald Schwartz and Heather Reisman, Rabbi Moscovitz has brought some of the greatest Jewish minds from around the world to comment on the issues of the day—from Israeli politics to matters of the spirit. He continues the work of the rabbis before him—promoting a kind of liberal Judaism that brings Holy Blossom Temple back to the centre of the body of the Jewish People.

In 1999 and 2000, Moscovitz crafted a series of vision statements to chart a course for Holy Blossom's future. Nearing its sesquicentennial anniversary, the congregation needed to think as boldly as its predecessors did in the 1930s. Like Rabbi Eisendrath before him, Rabbi Moscovitz promoted the necessity for a renewed physical structure to reflect and inspire a renewed synagogue-community. He asserts that "the ultimate aim is a spiritual and religious renewal" because "all Jews need a feeling of belonging to a community that has in its aspirations a relationship with the Divine." Under Moscovitz's direction, new leadership has emerged, bringing together more than 2,000 families into a religious community in which each member is encouraged to realize and fulfill his or her Jewish aspirations through sacred learning, worship of the Divine, and social responsibility.

There has been a slow and steady return to Jewish tradition at Holy Blossom. More Hebrew, ritual garb, and the simpler sounds of davening have made their way back into the services. Holy Blossom's relationship with the State of Israel has been strengthened and its ties to *K'lal Yisrael*, the totality of the Jewish People, have been reinforced. At the risk of oversimplifying the story, it could be said that if Holy Blossom's first century was concerned with how to raise Jewish children to be Canadian, its next half century was concerned with how to raise thoroughly Canadian children to be Jewish.



Holy Blossom Temple's path of 150 years has not been straight nor easy. It faced enormous challenges and overcame them. From a tiny Orthodox synagogue of some two dozen men to the mightiest Reform congregation in Canada and one of the premier synagogues in the world—it has been a remarkable adventure. It has weathered weighty religious divisions and deep personal conflicts and yet it persevered. Its most consistent attribute—unusual for most centres of worship—has been its ability, perhaps even its need, to challenge itself, to learn from its mistakes, and to keep fighting for its ultimate goals: to bring Jews and Judaism into the mainstream of Canadian life, to contribute to improving that mainstream, and to strengthen its ties to Israel and world Jewry.

It is a formidable task, but Holy Blossom Temple has proven to be a formidable synagogue.

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